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Harry Hansen

Harry Hansen has served for over three decades as one of America's outstanding literary critics. Born in Davenport on December 26, 1884, Hansen grew up in a community that placed a premium on literature, music, the theater, and the arts. Few cities could have afforded young Hansen a greater opportunity to develop his literary wings. Alice French, writing under the pseudonym Octave Thanet, was the leader of a school of writers that included such names as George Cram Cook, Susan Glaspell, and Arthur D. Ficke.

From earliest boyhood young Hansen took advantage of every opportunity to broaden his literary horizon. He likes to recall that he began his newspaper career on the day Admiral Schley defeated the Spanish at Santiago; at least he delivered newspapers on the streets of Davenport that day and has loved the smell of printer's ink ever since.

While attending high school in Davenport, Hansen wrote both for his school magazine and the *Leader and Republican*. After graduating from high school, he attended the University of Chicago where he majored in English. Graduating in 1909, Hansen served as alumni secretary and

as an editor of *University Magazine* until he accepted a job as reporter on the *Chicago Daily News*. In later years he frankly confessed he was "rotten on murders, but good on interviews." This quality, coupled with his knowledge of languages, led to his appointment in the spring of 1914 to the quiet post of correspondent in Berlin.

Although attention was focused on the Mexican border early in 1914, Harry Hansen found himself sitting on a powder keg in Berlin. The assassination at Sarajevo was followed by the outbreak of World War I, and soon Hansen was dogging the heels of the German army into Belgium. With such illustrious men as Irvin S. Cobb, John T. McCutcheon, and James O'Donnell Bennett, Harry Hansen followed the Germans uninvited into France. Later he covered Flanders, the siege of Antwerp, Scandinavia, Italy, and Austria. In 1919 he attended the peace conference. He wrote *The Adventures of the Fourteen Points*, a reporter's account of the Versailles conference.

Upon his return to Chicago, Harry Hansen became literary editor of the *Chicago Daily News* just in time to participate with Carl Sandburg, Edgar Lee Masters, Sherwood Anderson, and a score of others in the Middle Western movement. In 1923 he described his contemporaries in *Midwest Portraits*. In 1926 he succeeded Laurence Stallings, literary editor of the *New York World*

and writer of "The First Reader" comment on books, which Hansen developed into a daily column. When the *World* merged with the *Telegram* in 1931, Hansen took "The First Reader" into the new *World-Telegram*. Of critics and reviewers he later wrote:

A critic may do anything he wishes; but a reviewer possesses no charter to be anything more than an interpreter and announcer of books. A critic may write purely to entertain himself, or to impress other critics with his learning . . . the reviewer must read as he runs, shouting his opinions, among the din of ponderous presses. . . .

Harry Hansen's contributions are many, including *Carl Sandburg: The Man and His Poetry* (1924); *Your Life Lies Before You* (1935); *The Chicago* (Rivers of America, 1942); *Journalism in Wartime* (1943); *The Aspirin Age* (1949); and *Scarsdale* (1954). He has contributed to many magazines and encyclopaedias, translated several books, and served as chairman of the O. Henry Memorial Short Stories from 1933 to 1940. He was a member of the Armed Services editorial board during World War II and served as judge of the M-G-M \$200,000 novel award. Since 1948 he has served as editor of the *World Almanac*. He is married to Ruth McLernon of Chicago. They have two daughters, Ruth and Marian. The Hansens live in Mount Vernon, N. Y.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN